Disabling Structures: Perspectives on Marginalization in a Russian Cityscape

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Disabling Structures: Perspectives on Marginalization in a Russian Cityscape

Abstract
A recent Human Rights Watch report documented the ways in which people with mobility impairments in Russia are both physically and socially marginalized by the built environment in Russian cities, which is strikingly inaccessible. These photos attempt to center the perspective of people with disabilities traversing (or being limited by) the Russian cityscape, and explore the ways in which (failure to adhere to) building codes effectively limit the public participation of people with (certain) disabilities in the daily life of the democracy. Subtle barriers, immediately obvious to a wheelchair-user, begin to emerge for the viewer considering these photographs. They document the ways in which people with disabilities recognize the material structures of the city as socially produced, and as a key factor excluding them from public life. Seemingly passive objects and the history of particular infrastructures turn out to be arbiters of marginalization, domination, and discrimination. Some of these photos have appeared on a collaborative blog documenting accessible and inaccessible entryways in the city of Petrozavodsk, Russia. Some images are examples of what I call check-mark ramps --- objects that look like ramps, but don’t “work,” i.e. that don’t actually facilitate access for people with mobility impairments. Images of such “failed” ramps have circulated as an internet meme, but their ubiquity elides the fact that there are far more places that simply lack the elements of accessible architecture altogether. This photo essay is related to the ongoing digital installation project DYTLI, based on the same ethnographic research.

Keywords
russia, disability theory, access, violence, landscapes, city, marginalization

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Cassandra Hartblay is an ethnographer, documentarian and activist artist currently completing a Ph.D. in anthropology at UNC Chapel Hill. Her work on disability access in Russia has received support and recognition from the Society for Disability Studies, the US Department of State Title VIII Program, and the National Science Foundation.

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Rarely going out means that people with mobility impairments, like Alina and Sveta, are left out of the public landscape of the city. When they are excluded from this everyday expression of personhood - walking as fellow citizens out for a stroll - by barriers in the built environment, people with disabilities are in turn excluded from popular perceptions of the population of the city.

Photo Credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2013
Medium: digital photo
Alina, a 34-year-old with Cerebral Palsy talks with her neighbor's children, as they all look at social media on her computer in the apartment she shares with her mother. For Alina, like many Russians with mobility impairments, visitors and online friendships are the main way that she stays connected with people. During winter months, when the courtyard outside her building is covered with compacted snow and ice, she can't make her way to the bus stop, and so rarely leaves her apartment (taxis are too expensive on her poverty-level disability pension).

Photo credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2012
Medium: digital photo

A ramp in front of a neighborhood grocery store looks well-constructed at first glance. But, a second look shows that the final lip of the ramp is in disrepair. The door at the top of the ramp opens at an angle awkward for a wheelchair user to navigate. Upon entering the store one finds the tight turns in the vestibule too narrow for a wheelchair or stroller, and inch-high thresholds.

While this storefront, unlike many others in the city, is "accessible," Sveta, a wheelchair-user who lives in a neighboring building, can only enter the store with great difficulty: she relies on the help of her husband to hold doors, push her through tight spots, and lift her wheelchair over high thresholds. As a result, she rarely goes grocery shopping.

Photo credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2012
Medium: digital photo
A recent Human Rights Watch report (2013) documented the ways that people with mobility impairments in Russia are physically and socially marginalized by the built environment. The photos in this series center on the perspectives of people with disabilities traversing or being limited by the Russian cityscape. Furthermore, it explores the ways in which failure to adhere to building codes effectively limit the public participation of people with certain disabilities in the daily life of the democracy. Subtle barriers, which are immediately obvious to a wheelchair-user, but often, overlooked by non-disabled observers, here take center stage, as do the ongoing social and political processes by which these barriers are reproduced.

People with disabilities recognize the material structures of the city as socially produced barriers; a key factor excluding them from public life. Seemingly passive objects, like poorly executed ramps, or curbs without curb-cuts, seen in this perspective are the product of complex social processes and agentive decision-making. Elements of material urban worlds and design infrastructure turn out to be arbiters of marginalization, domination, and discrimination. These human geographies are shaped by particular histories, and in turn, produce locally specific experiences of disability. In this sense, disability is culturally contingent not only symbolically, but also materially (Gleeson 1999; Imrie and Hall 2001).

The images in this series observe people with disabilities in their homes, or document structural barriers and the ongoing processes that reproduce these barriers; some show acts of activism that resist these processes. Some images are examples of what I call check-mark ramps. These are objects that look like ramps, but fail to function in a way that facilitates access for people with mobility impairments. Hence, they just seem to work for infrastructural planners who simply check-off "accessibility ramp" on a checklist of architectural standards. Images of such check-mark ramps have circulated as an internet meme, but their ubiquity elides the fact that there are far more places in Russian urban spaces that simply lack the elements of accessible architecture altogether.

These photos are but one result of twelve months of engaged ethnographic field work in the Russian Federation, in Petrozavodsk, the capital city of the Karelian Republic. Developed in collaboration with local activists, artists, and social workers, this fieldwork sought to address how disability is experienced and performed in contemporary Russia. The images here focus on the viewpoint of people with mobility impairments. However, people with sensory impairments, intellectual disability, and mental illness also experience profound isolation and social marginalization.
A construction crew works through the night to renovate one of the main roads in the center of Petrozavodsk. Although the construction required setting new curbs, curb cuts were not included in the design, as recommended in federal building codes (Russian Federation 2001). While the construction renewed accessibility for motorists by covering over badly potholed central roadway, it left high curbs at a central crosswalk, which children, elderly, and mobility-impaired citizens struggle to navigate.

Photo Credit: Cassandra Hartblay  
Year: 2012  
Medium: Digital Photo

The city buses in Petrozavodsk are old. Although renovations added new handrails at steep front- and rear- entrance steps, snow flurries often manage to sneak through gaps and into the bus. Buses are often crowded, aisles are narrow, and interiors have two platform levels separated by a step. Like the curbs and ramps, the difficulty of mounting the steps of a public bus creates a barrier for wheelchair users, which, in turn limits movement through the city for these users, as well as their visibility as fellow citizens to nondisabled bus riders.

Photo Credit: Cassandra Hartblay  
Year: 2013  
Medium: Digital Photo
This crosswalk has a flashing crossing signal for pedestrians, but no curb cut to allow anyone on wheels to easily navigate the transition from sidewalk to street. Unlike a check-mark ramp, which can immediately be read as inaccessible by non-disabled passersby with a familiarity with the aesthetic vocabulary of accessibility ramps, an inaccessible curb fades into the background. But when we center the perspectives of people with mobility impairments, a curb without a curb cut emerges as a marker of inaccess, a constant disincentive to traverse the streets and public space of the city, and a barrier to social and political participation.

Photo credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2012
Medium: digital photo
This project contributes to an emerging disability study of postsoviet space (Phillips 2011; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2013), and to ethnography/documentary photography collaborations that use images of marginal spaces to address the material realities of stigma and social marginalization (e.g. Biehl and Eskarod 2005; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). This work offers insights to the global complexity of how accessible design standards move unevenly into non-western infrastructures, and to the emerging mandate in Anglo-American disability studies to investigate nonwestern disability experience (Hamraie 2013; Hendren 2013; Johnson and McRuer 2014). Attention to disability experience adds to conversations in ethnography of post-soviet Russia in relation to the existent barriers to political participation and the reticence to accommodate minority interests. Disability is often overlooked as a minority identity, but concern for disability justice and integrating disability theory uncovers terrains of violence and exclusion that affect all citizens. Moreover, it contributes to understanding how societies practice and materially enact exclusion of particular groups of people.

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A February day dawns late, around 9am, light reflecting over an icy driveway in a residential region of the city. Petrozavodsk’s geographic location in Northwest Russia (North of Saint Petersburg, near the Finnish border) lends a particular Nordic quality to the weather and seasonal cycle: spring, summer, and early fall are temperate and even hot, winters are long and dark. In mid-winter, weeks upon weeks of snowfall accumulates to form a thick layer of compacted slush - sliakot’ in Russian - that coats the sidewalks, public squares, roads, and pathways of the city. Sliakot’ creates an impediment to the mobility of any pedestrian or vehicle, but is considered a normal and unavoidable part of daily life.

Photo Credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2013
Medium: Digital Photo
In a frame from a local news broadcast, a disability rights advocate allows herself to be carried up the steps leading to the platform at the Petrozavodsk train station, which is the main artery connecting the city to the rest of Russia, in order to demonstrate the station’s inaccessibility to a group of gathered journalists. Although activists won a lawsuit in 2011 stating that the city government must renovate the train station to provide accessible entranceways to the arrivals hall, platforms, and ticketing hall, city officials responded that they would not consider making any changes until a regularly scheduled renovation comes due in 2016.

Photo Credit: Sampo TV News Studio, Petrozavodsk
Year: October 5, 2012
Medium: Digital Photo (screenshot)

A meeting to discuss future plans for a non-profit serving adults with disabilities in the city is held on the third floor of a building with a broken elevator. While the blind president of the All-Disability Committee is in attendance, advocates who use wheelchairs were not in the room. This economic and structural barrier (the non-profit could not afford to fix the elevator) resulted in wheelchair-users literally not being invited to the table.

Photo Credit: Cassandra Hartblay
Year: 2012
Medium: Digital Photo